

Our Father’s Gift of Tenderness

People of good will, and especially Christians with a heart and desire to live a life of holiness, are unhappy with the direction taken by the world culture of our day. This is true with respect to the spread of narcissism, greed, exploitation, violence and the wholesale destruction of human life, and it touches us all in how we have become inclined to live out our human sexuality. I write this instruction as a Roman Catholic priest and pastor of a local Christian community of faith, a parish. There is an element of fatherhood in this role of pastor, which requires me not only to teach by word and example, but also to offer discipline – the kind of word and action which is designed to bring into the light of day erroneous understanding and wrong or sinful behavior to correct it. It would be fair to say that in our day we are witnessing a crisis of fatherhood, in large part due to our culture’s rejection of discipline in the areas of morality, sexuality, and behaviour. It’s difficult to say what no one wants to hear.

Since the time of the Apostles, when Jesus first called them his little children, through the action of the Holy Spirit God the Father developed the assembly of disciples Jesus established as his Church into a community of faith, a living social body endowed with many of the traits we identify with the family. Jesus gave birth to his Church through the blood and water that flowed from his side opened by the soldier’s lance as He lay dead upon the Cross, just as God had brought forth Eve from Adam’s opened side. Of course this is symbolic imagery, but it expresses a profound truth that God has taken the trouble to reveal to us in this way. Having given birth to his Church – this assembly of his disciples – Jesus made her his Bride in the Marriage God first made with mankind as a betrothal at the moment when He was conceived in Mary’s womb by the Holy Spirit and as God’s Son was united to a human flesh. From conception to resurrection, Jesus took on the human roles of both Husband and Father.

Mary is the New Eve in that she said yes to God’s plan, redeeming the first Eve who had said no when she surrendered to her own will in the moment of her temptation. The Church is the New Eve in that she is the Mother through whom God brings forth children for himself – redeeming those trapped in the condition of slavery to sin and setting them free to live in holiness as true children of their God and Father – entrusting them to his Divine Son Jesus, whom He has made Lord and Saviour of us all. The Church gives these new children of God birth through the font of Baptism, the Holy Chrism, and the Sacred Body and Blood of Jesus at the Eucharistic Sacrifice and Passover Meal. It is Jesus who purifies them of sin and fills them with divine life – by the action in them of the Holy Spirit – through the sacrifice He made of himself at the Last Supper Passover Meal when He substituted himself as the New Lamb for a Passover from sin and death to holiness and eternal life and through its fulfillment on the Cross when He literally offered his life to rescue all of us sinners from sin and death. Jesus loves and nurtures these new children of God, caring for them and disciplining them as any good human father does. Jesus set in motion a model of spiritual fathering that He entrusted to his Apostles when He commanded them to love one another and serve one another as He had shown them to do.

It was an evolution both natural and spiritual that the fledgling community of faith, which very quickly gave birth to more communities of faith, had at their head a father figure representing to them and giving them an example of the kind of teaching, discipline, care and leadership both provided and modeled by Jesus. To this day, local Christian churches in Orthodox and Roman Catholic traditions have continued from those apostolic times until today to recognize and expect pastoral leadership in the person of an ordained bishop or priest, in whom they recognize a servant of the fatherly care, discipline, and leadership first provided by Jesus and passed on by Him.

St. Thomas à Becket Parish – Meaning and Purpose of Life – Human Sexuality – God’s Plan

This is the main reason why these Christians to this day call their bishops and priests “Father” – not in disobedience to Jesus’ instruction to call no one on earth “Father” since we all have only one Father who is in Heaven – but in imitation of Jesus’ own practice and example. Jesus’ instruction not to call others “father” was a warning against living out a perverted form of paternalism as it was seen in the Temple authorities who misused the power given them to lead the people to the holy life offered and expected by God, and instead exploited the people and actually made it more difficult for the poor ordinary child of Israel to live in accord with the spiritual laws entrusted to them by God from the time of Moses. Through his teaching, example, discipline, care and leadership, and by calling his disciples his children, Jesus modeled a new pattern of spiritual paternity to be learned, imitated, and practiced not only by religious leaders and pastors, but also by fathers of families.

The Institut de Formation Humaine et Intégrale de Montréal speaks of our human sexuality as a God-given capacity to express – to give and to receive – tenderness. By this we mean a variety of forms of expression between two persons and among several people – especially in community – that communicate genuine love, a love that is focused on and seeks first and foremost the good of the other. However, due to our weakened intellect and sinful human condition, our capacity to give authentic expression to love, to have and also to act on a true understanding of what is good, and to show chaste, appropriate, and honest forms of tenderness, has been wounded and confused. Any conscience that is at all awake already has a sense that – in our time and in our current culture and society – all is not well with human sexuality and tenderness. We can’t handle the tension of living chaste with others.

We can no longer delay exploring together all that is good but also all that is not well with our human sexuality: what we ourselves have come to know and experience, what our society and culture transmit – both openly and secretly – and what God’s plan is for us individually and collectively. We invite you, the reader, to adopt with us our Church’s teaching that our human sexuality is an integral part of the gift of our human life entrusted to us by God, and because He is the giver, He also has a plan for our individual and collective happiness that includes instructions on how to make the proper and best use of all our gifts and capacities. This includes our capacity for tenderness in a whole host of different relationships and varied situations – including all that can be defined as pertaining to our human sexuality. This also implies that before God we all have a responsibility to learn everything that can be known about his plan for us, to govern our lives and actions in accord with this plan, and then to help others to do the same – especially doing all we can to transmit God’s plan to our children – and to provide them with an apprenticeship into life, that they may come to know and understand their sexuality and develop their ability to give and receive tenderness in appropriate and chaste ways.

What is it that our culture primarily portrays about human sexuality? What seems to stand out is the premise or belief that it is all about pleasure and the “chemistry” that can happen under certain conditions between people. This spontaneous happening is prized above all else. Whatever else may be happening in people’s lives is considered irrelevant. One or both of them is already committed in a marriage relationship? They already have children in another family? They are of the same gender? No matter. They want friendship and love, but not the inner human call to look outwards and live their life for the others who could be conceived from their love. Sexual pleasure is now the supreme value, setting aside all others. We can manipulate fertility and make it sterile and be free not to respect it. In fact, by isolating our fertility from sexual intercourse and the marital relationship of love designed for the establishment of a procreative family, we deny our true human identity and cut short our call and destiny, refusing to rise to the challenge of our nature. We want to be with people just like us and have difficulty living with those who are different. We don’t like tension. What’s wrong with this picture?